



You're Going the Wrong Way!

By Lt. Daniel Moroney

During our cruise, my squadron conducted split-site operations, with half of our squadron on the ship and the other half on shore. Just as I was getting comfortable with carrier operations, I was sent to join some of my squadronmates at a forward-operations base in Iraq.

This assignment was my first rotation off the ship, so I still hadn't learned the procedures for flying in and around this particular base. Fortunately, an advance detachment from my squadron already had been put in place to get familiar with the area operations. Their local course rules called for some unusual procedures, but they still were relatively basic for experienced aircrew. The approach required a rather steep descent because of towns and possible surface-to-air threats close to the airfield. Another concern was the possibility of nonstandard right-hand breaks to staggered parallel runways. These breaks are a problem in the EA-6B because the pilot has to look over the ECMO in the right seat to gauge lineup.

On this day, two of the advance-det aircrew were on board our Prowler. The brief was thorough and covered all parts of the mission, with no questions left unanswered. As we took off, we felt confident we had enough experience to handle the situation.

Our mission included some rather benign flying not far from the base. The flight profile was consistent with our training in the months leading to deployment, so the stress level was rather low. Although I was a relatively new mission-commander pilot, I did have experience operating out of unfamiliar bases. The rest of my crew consisted of a rightseater, who was relatively new to the Prowler, but had completed several cruises in an S-3 squadron; a relatively new JO riding in ECMO 2; and a senior lieutenant commander sitting in ECMO 3. ECMOs 1 and 3 had been part of the early det.

The missions and tanking went as briefed, and our aircrew got needed experience. With our mission complete and our bodies sore after six and a half hours of flight time, we were ready to come home. After our last orbit, we went jammers off, checked out through the appropriate agencies, and checked in with approach.

The field was landing to the west, with the pattern open, but haze had limited the visibility. As we started our descent, expecting a standard overhead arrival, the base controller said we needed to do a straight-in because of possible FOD. So, we planned to descend east of the field but still relatively close because of the surface-to-air threat. We intended to complete a right-hand turn, and fly a straight-in to the southern runway.

The visibility up high had been good with the runways easily in sight, but as we descended, the haze quickly built, which made the field difficult to pick out from the surrounding terrain. Keeping up our speed on the descent at five miles east of the field, I started our base leg and slowed down. The haze had dropped visibility to about one mile. Because of the sight restrictions of the cockpit, I had to rely on turn calls from ECMO 1 to line up on the runway during the right-hand turn. I also was busy with trying to slow the aircraft, dirty-up, and getting on glideslope, so I only heard part of the tower calls.

After receiving directive calls from ECMO 1, we were lined up on the runway with only the end of it in sight. During the final turn, tower had cleared an aircraft for departure on the right parallel runway. As we approached the field, tower cleared us to land on the left but stated they did not yet have visual on us. In response, I turned on the taxi light and continued the approach.

As the rest of the field slowly came into view, I realized the sight picture did not look right. Tower still did not have a visual on us, the parallel runway still was not in sight, and the buildings did not match up with what I expected. I asked ECMO 1 which runway we were cleared to land on, and he clarified we were cleared for the left. At this point, I realized we were lined up on the right, confirmed by the runway numbers I now could see. We were about one-quarter mile from touchdown. We immediately waved off, looked for the departing traffic, told tower we were taking it around, and climbed to pattern altitude. We came around and landed on the correct runway.

Upon landing, we informed tower of the incident and conducted a thorough debrief. We found several factors had contributed to the mistake, which easily could have been avoided.

Among the contributing factors was the weather. While the haze significantly had reduced visibility, we initially were lulled into a more confident approach

by the views at altitude, which prompted us to take a more aggressive approach. Another factor was the perceived surface-to-air threat. While this threat did exist, its probability was very low because the base had not been attacked for several months. We should have realized the level of threat, been less aggressive in the descent, and focused more attention on correctly flying the approach. While the limitations of the EA-6B-cockpit visibility cannot be changed, its effects should have been better recognized. I had extended our downwind leg to provide more time for the turn to final. I also had told ECMO 1 he needed to talk me through the turn for lineup, but I had not anticipated how the haze would contribute to misidentifying the correct runway. Combining this situation with my inexperience at the field, I failed to realize the mistake early enough.

Our crew developed several measures to avoid repeating this problem. While studying the course rules is a must, having a thorough understanding of the airport layout also is important. If I had had a better understanding of what visual cues existed at the airfield, I would have realized that if I could see the approach end of the left runway, I also should have been able to see the aircraft hangars to the south and the parallel runway to the north. While this knowledge may not have prevented the problem, it would have prompted a quicker response.

We can help ourselves by making the approach and departure ends of the runway active-navigation waypoints, rather than the midfield point. This action will allow the pilots to line up on the correct centerline, even without visual cues—GPS is a beautiful thing.

While it was combat operations, it was not combat that could have killed us. We needed to realize the actual threat level, our personal and crew-experience level, and responded appropriately. 

Lt. Moroney flies with VAQ-140.

The vast majority of our aircraft damage and losses are not the result of enemy actions but from our actions, which we identify as the Blue Threat. We are our worst enemy when it comes to causing mishaps. Lt. Moroney points out that combat wasn't the problem, but rather their crew's actions. Two recent issues of Approach (September-October 2006 and November-December 2006) have discussed the Blue-Threat topic; they are available online at: <http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/approach/default.htm>. —Ed.